

Floral Arrangements (For Funerals) by cupidintern

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

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Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Billy Hargrove's Mother, Dustin Henderson, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Robin Buckley, Steve Harrington, Steve Harrington's Mother, Susan Hargrove

Relationships: Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington

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Summary:

When he was a kid, Billy's mom gave him a pendant on a gold chain and told him never to take it off.

Weird. Witchy. But Billy trusted her.

She told him she loved him. More than anyone.

Billy never took the necklace off.

He sort of objected to magic being done on minors. And he always sort of knew that's what it was, and that maybe it wasn't totally... kosher. But he never took it off.

He still had it on now. If any light could have gotten in through the black and satin lining of the coffin, it would have glinted, still gold.

Because he wasn't dead. He was only asleep.

And everyone knows how to wake Sleeping Beauty.

1. sorry for your loss. hope you find it again

Author's Note:

look at what i've accomplished!
do you think a depressed person could make this???

anyway hey guys welcome back to me shoving magic
into fics bc it makes me happy. if you're reading this,
hey thanks! thats way cool of you. no one reads the
notes. hope ur having a good day and enjoy the fic.

Steve brought roses on instinct. A dozen red roses, like you'd bring to a date. Or to a grave. This was both, wasn't it?

First of probably many dates where Steve would be sitting across from a polished rock. Rather than, you know, a person. Alive.

Billy never let Steve bring him roses. Said it was too cheesy. Too much. But Steve could always sort of tell he was just brushing it off to avoid blushing redder than the flowers themselves.

So maybe Steve brought roses just because he knew it would piss Billy off a little. If he could have been there to be pissed off.

Steve parked at the edge of the graveyard. Had to motivate to stand up. He'd left roses laying shotgun. Leaning over to get them, he noticed the ashtray, half full, and looked away too quick, smacked his wrist on the edge of the wheel getting out of the car.

So he was standing, holding a dozen roses, and realized he hadn't worn black like a fucking idiot. He'd just worn jeans and a t-shirt- it wasn't even cold yet.

Steve wouldn't get to hear Billy bitch about how cold it got how early this year.

Steve didn't know if he had it in him to walk from here to-

But he already brought the roses.

Might as well.

Steve had hated the funeral- two days ago. Mostly because Max had to sit up front even though she'd been crying into Steve's shoulder for the half hour before they all had to sit down- Billy's parents were more religious than Steve had realized.

Steve sat in the back. Decided halfway through the dumb scripted speech about how "William was an upstanding young man" that he couldn't take it and got up to go outside.

Walked around back of the stupid fucking whitewash-brick church and crouched, pulling a half-smoked pack he'd stolen from Billy's car two weeks ago and a lighter from his pocket.

He had to *do* something. Or he'd end up crying again. And he hated doing that.

Boots crunched on the gravel behind the building- too light to be Billy's, Steve was always listening for that step- but it was only Robin. Steve didn't have to stop trying to light his cigarette- wouldn't even spark. Were his hands shaking?

Robin didn't say anything, she just sank down to sit next to him, leaned her back against the wall.

"Not gonna tell me I should quit?" Steve got out, relieved his voice was steadier than he thought it would be.

"Nope." Robin tilted her head up, squinting in the sunlight. "But you should."

That might have made Steve smile. It didn't. He got his cigarette lit, almost took too long of a drag, but if he coughed, he would definitely cry. And he didn't want to cry in front of Robin. Again.

Robin looked so pretty in black, but the sun made her dress look almost grey.

"You wanna stay out here for the rest of it?" Robin asked him, gentle

as anything.

Steve fiddled with the buttons on his suit jacket with his free hand. "Dunno."

Robin just nodded.

Steve sat a little lower, let his head tip against her shoulder. "Can you come over again?" He asked her.

She frowned, guilty maybe. She shouldn't feel guilty, she'd come over every night since-

"Not tonight."

Like cracking your head against a doorway, Steve felt the vibration of a much lower, smoother ' *not tonight, pretty boy,* ' in his skull.

"C'mon, *why not?*"

"Folks want me home. I've been 'going out too much.'" Billy put air quotes around the word.

"Fuck that. You're not even going out." Steve had squeezed his arms around Billy's chest a little tighter. Then, "Tomorrow night?"

Billy smiled, his all-teeth sparkly smile. "Promise."

"Steve?"

Steve sat up, refocused on Robin's voice. "Hm?"

"I said I don't think I can come over tonight. Is that, like, okay?"

"Yeah. Sure." Steve puffed his cig again, not looking at her.

"You'll... be okay?"

"Yeah." He looked at her then. Her brows were furrowed.

"Just. Please call me. If you need anything. You know I have my own line."

"I know."

"Okay." She still looked worried.

Steve waited long enough to say goodbye to Max. She hugged him too tight- hurt where his ribs had gotten bruised the week before. He hugged her back.

She didn't cry again. But she took a little too long to let go.

Steve drove Robin home. She didn't talk, but he could tell she was staring at him.

"Call me tonight, at some point." She stopped to bend down outside the car door when they got to her place.

"Okay."

"And don't-" She blinked a little, collecting her thoughts. "Don't do anything... rash."

Both of them could remember the night after Starcourt, into the early hours of the morning, Steve feeling like he was in a nightmare that refused to fucking end when he told Robin *"I don't think I can do this without him."*

"Steve-" She was crying like she was trying not to, not even out of her Scoops uniform yet, holding his arm even as he tried to pull away.

"I can't- I'm not- I can't be on my own. I need him-"

"I'm not gonna kill myself, Robin." Steve sighed a little.

She flinched at the words. "Okay." Her hair looked like a halo, pulled up and backed by the sun.

She squeezed his hand before ducking her head back out of the window and walking away.

He hadn't even realized she was holding it.

Steve didn't listen to any music on the ride back to his house. Didn't

want to risk it.

Didn't even really let himself think as he parked, got out, let the sounds of his door clicking shut and the gravel under his feet slide through his head, nothing to catch them. Nothing he wanted to remember. Didn't want to lose any space that could be better occupied by memories that tasted like ash and chlorine and sweat and night air and Paco Rabanne-

Too loud. Steve needed the world quiet right now. Not as quiet as his house would feel with no one in it, thought. Steve didn't count as a person when the house was empty- he became a piece of furniture. A decorative abstract sculpture like the ones his mother loved to collect on the mantle, unable to keep himself company.

He pulled the door open, was ready for silence, but was met by-

"Welcome back, darling!" shouted from the kitchen.

Steve startled a little. "Uh, hey, mom!" He called back. "I didn't see the car."

And briefly he wondered if she was cooking, but as he walked in, of course she wasn't. Just getting white wine out of the fridge.

"Your father took it to get looked at. We had to come back early- the engine was making this strange noise- and I mean, I told him we should just get a new one, I never liked this model to begin with- " She stood up, bottle in hand, crossed to the counter with her glass on it. "You look nice." She smiled at him.

"Thanks." He ran a hand over the bottom seam of his jacket.

She lifted the bottle and raised her meticulously plucked eyebrows at him.

"I'm good."

She shrugged, and poured her own glass. "So what's the occasion?" She smoothed her hand over Steve's shoulder as she passed him to sit at the kitchen table. "A date?" She sounded so hopeful.

“A funeral.”

“Oh?” Brow furrowed, she looked over at him. “For *who*? ”

Steve let himself lie on autopilot. Just like he’d have lied about it before. “Max’s brother. Died in the, uh. The mall fire.”

“Who’s Max again?” She sipped her wine.

“A friend.”

She nodded.

Honestly, Steve didn't look anything like his father. People always said that when they saw the three of them- perfect, happy family.

He looked just like his mom. With her straight nose and wavy pile of hair, pinned up so the characteristic swoop at the front got all the attention, even now with its light streaking of grey. Tasteful moles across her cheek-

On the rare occasion that Steve's parents acted like they loved each other, usually for show at parties, Steve’s father would say he knew she was the one when he first saw her- because she looked like a golden age movie star.

“Steve?”

Steve realized he’d been staring. He cleared his throat. “Yeah?”

His mother’s voice got soft. “Sweetheart, are you alright?”

“I-” Steve was ready with the response. Totally prepared with the “*I’m fine just tired*”. But, he tried to push it out. Tried to brush it off and. Nothing.

Steve shook his head, trying to get his lips to move but-

She hadn't talked to him like that in so long. He crossed to her before he really knew what he was doing, knelt at her side, put his head in her lap, he could feel her surprise before he screwed his eyes shut, inhaled Chanel No. 5 on the silk of her blouse and exhaled one cough of a sob, one smooth jolt through his whole body. He hadn't cried

since the night of. Not once. But he was crying now. Tears clung to his cheeks. And maybe that was a bad move, maybe she would freak out or something- they weren't exactly. Affectionate.

But Steve could feel her thin fingers, long nails, run through the hair at the back of his head as she murmured, "Oh, Stevie." She sounded so worried, finding his hand to hold in her own- cool and smooth. Like photographs of old movie stars. Or a statue. He was holding her hand too tight, he knew. But he didn't want to let go. He just wanted to be there, to just breathe, hold his mom's hand.

After a moment, she lifted his head up, even as he tried to turn away- "What's wrong- Steve, honey-"

He shook his head, tried to control his breathing.

She pursed her lips. "I know you were there, the night of the fire. But I didn't... know." She was saying, but the sound slid through Steve's head, no traction, just like the gravel and the car door and every silent sunrise that had happened since the fourth. But then, "We should have come home sooner."

Steve blinked. She was really trying, for once. He pressed the last of his tears away, shrugged.

She smoothed her thumb over the back of his hand. "I love you very much, darling."

Steve knew she meant it. Even if she never said it, and was maybe only saying it now hoping it would help. But she meant it. Just like she meant it when she used to say it all the time when he was a kid. Two versions of his mother, one warm like a painting, the other cold like marble. Both beautiful. Both loved him.

"Love you, too." He managed.

She searched his face, but did not speak again. "Why don't you get changed before your father gets back. We can get dinner."

He just nodded. Forced himself to stand back up. His hand slid from hers.

He sort of wished he could tell her. But they weren't like that, even if she wouldn't, you know, disown him or something. They weren't like that.

"You don't have to uh, tell dad about this." Steve mumbled, already looking at the doorway, sniffing hard, once, trying to clear his system.

She smiled a little, brow still knitted. "Of course."

Steve nodded. Went upstairs to get changed.

Steve was silent for most of dinner- they got italian, and thankfully only ran into one person his parents knew that he had to shake hands with.

He spent most of the hour or so thinking of what to say to Robin on the phone.

"I cried in my moms lap like a fuckin baby for ten mintues" sounded lame. "Let out some of my pent up emotions" or "let myself experience grief" both sounded stupid.

"It's only been a week, remember" Robin's voice crackled through the receiver when Steve found himself on the phone with her a while later. He sort of wished he'd stop zoning out for such extended periods of time. Sort of wished next time he'd never zone back in-

"You should go easy on yourself."

"Yeah."

"Okay, can you just repeat back to me what I said so I know you're listening." She only sounded a little exasperated.

Steve might have smiled, didn't. "You said I should go easier on myself."

"Great."

“Since when are you my grief counselor anyway.” Steve readjusted his grip on the phone in his room. “You’re my friend. I should get a real therapist.”

“You do have all those freebies with the government.”

Steve rolled his eyes. “Sure.”

“Did you get a chance to eat something?” She asked him.

“Got dinner with my parents.” Steve thought back to his mom glancing at him nervously every so often, like maybe he’d go off again. Sort of cheapened their earlier interaction.

“I didn’t know they were in town.”

“Me neither.” The phone started ringing again, and Steve could guess who it was, so, “Hey, Rob, I think Max is calling me.”

“Okay, talk tomorrow?”

“Sure.”

“I love you.” Everyone’s favorite thing to say to him today, apparently.

“Love you, too.”

He picked up the call. It was Max.

Max had rescued a box of stuff. That’s what she said, just “stuff.” And did Steve want to go through it tomorrow morning?

“Neil’s clearing out the room. Don’t want him to know I took anything.”

Steve said he’d pick her up. They could get breakfast.

“I want the jacket. Non negotiable.” Was the first thing Max said when she dropped the box into the passenger side of Steve’s car.

“Ooookay.” He almost smiled.

Max slammed his door getting in after the box, pulling it onto her lap to open. They had decided on drive-thru for breakfast. Both of them apparently trying to pretend they’d been eating normal.

Steve felt a little sour at the edges being up this early- and it was already nine. He’d just been leaning on his stash a little harder to get to sleep but. At least he was sleeping now.

“If I cry, just punch me in the shoulder or something.” She said, pulling the flaps of the box open, digging stuff out.

“I’m not gonna punch you, Max.” Steve tried, making a mental note that if he got even close to crying he should just cut their visit short. No way was he shedding a tear in front of Max.

She wasn't listening to him, just picking stuff out to set on his dash.

The jean jacket- “That’s mine.”

“Yeah, man, you already said.”-

T-shirts. Two of them. Max handed both to Steve. He folded them both without really thinking about it, set them on the back seat.

Then it was a bunch of little stuff. A bottle of cologne Steve grabbed without asking. Some other junk. A rolled up poster. An ashtray. One of two nicknacks that meant nothing to neither Max nor Steve. But they must have meant something to Billy.

A jewelry box. Various earrings in it, some of them tangled together. A ring. And a bottle cap.

Steve recognized the bottle cap. It was from their first date.

He kept it together in front of Max though.

And they got breakfast. Which they ate silently. And then parted ways.

Steve sat in his car for a while, very aware of the stuff stacked up on

his backseat.

Then he drove home and sat in his driveway because he couldn't seem to transition from one activity to another without so much fucking effort.

He let his head fall forward onto his steering wheel without thinking about it, accidentally hit the edge of the horn which made him sit right back up.

Fuck. Not even graceful when in mourning, huh.

His parents were still home, so walking up to his room with an armful of random shit might raise some kind of suspicion. They also might just not care.

But Steve just wanted to be alone right now.

Quick as he could so he wouldn't have to think, he reached behind his seat and grabbed one of the shirts.

He held it, looked at it. Then buried his face in it and inhaled.

Every fiber in his body relaxed. He sunk back against the driver's seat, sighed, a long, relieved sigh, the familiarity washing over him and for a solid gold moment, everything was fine.

The short relife made the relati that came crashing back down around him even worse.

Steve would sit in his car and cry into this t-shirt for seven minutes. Then he would put it back in his backseat and go inside like nothing happened.

He couldn't let it all out at once- or it might actually kill him. If anyone was going to die from a broken heart, it would be Steve.

Steve took a nap. His parents left again. Robin came over.

"You seem. Better?" Was the first thing she said when he opened the

door.

Steve nodded without meaning too. "I'm just stoned."

"Ah."

Steve furrowed his brow. "I probably should have told you that before you came over. You don't have to stay if-"

"No!" Robin put out her hands. "I don't care if you're high, dingus. I'm just here to hang out with you."

Steve nodded again. He stepped aside to let her in.

Robin had been coming over most nights for a while. Steve once expressed his concern that she felt the need to take care of him- she countered by saying she was not without her own shell-shock-

"And I feel. Safe. With you."

Steve liked being felt safe with.

Steve suggested they sit in the backyard, by the pool, and Robin said she was down but if he pushed her in she'd stab him.

"You know? I 100% believe you would do that."

"Thank you."

Steve got himself a beer, and got Robin a juice box because "I know you don't drink."

"Oh my god, Steve. You get your mom to buy you juice boxes still?"

"You think my mom would ever set foot in a supermarket? I buy *myself* juice boxes."

That made Robin laugh. Steve almost smiled.

They sat outside. Steve with his beer, Robin with her six ounces of *Tropical Blast* .

And mostly when they would do this they would sit in silence. Poolside watching the water glow. Or on the couch in the den

watching hours of MTV go by- the only channel they could ever agree on.

Steve always thought maybe, tonight would be the night. Any night could be the one he finally talked about it- because that's what you were supposed to do. Talk about it.

Steve just always had better luck waiting until something else happened, and he could forget. Keep going. Skip the processing part and just... move on.

"You're in his chair." Steve said finally. And it seemed... normal. Like maybe he could talk about Billy if he wasn't *dead*, per say. He just. Wasn't here.

Robin was looking at him. "Like, you want me to move?-"

"No! No, just." Steve sipped his beer. "He always sits- sat. There." Robin nodded.

Steve kept going. "There's a melted part of the chair arm- look." He pointed, Robin lifted her arm to say. "Cigarette burn. I Told him that would happen and he put it out there anyway."

"Sounds like him. From what you've said."

"Yeah."

"You haven't said a lot though."

Steve turned to look at Robin again. She looked expectant. He shrugged.

"Do you... want? To talk about him?"

"I'm supposed to, right?" He tapped the can in his hands with his fingertips.

"You don't have to."

Steve chewed his lip. "It's hard."

“Yeah.”

The pool water lapped gently at its tile edges. Robin finished her juice box.

“We used to have this, like, joke,” Steve said finally, relieved the words didn’t crack him in half to say. “That if we were still together in a year we’d run away together.”

“That’s romantic.”

“It was stupid.” Steve said, but he was almost smiling at his hands.

“It’s really not.”

Steve hummed a little. “Doesn't matter now.”

“Did you... want to?” Robin asked gently. “Run away with him, I mean.”

Steve stared into the neon blue of the illuminated pool water. He didn't respond.

Doesn't matter now.

Steve got more high when Robin left. Pretty much smoked until he physically could not keep his eyes open. He was too close to opening the floodgates. If he admitted to himself how much it hurt, it would just start hurting and never stop. He wasn't ready for that yet. Wasn't ready to stop holding his breath for something, anything...

Steve knew what denial was.

And he kept falling asleep on the floor, rather than his bed.

Because the only time he'd gotten into his bed since the fourth, he'd found one long golden hair and had to get up and leave the room for a solid ten minutes, just breathe in the hallway before he could face his stupid plaid walls again.

Steve woke up- still on the floor- and saw the sun rising. Not a *great* amount of sleep. But still. He may as well get up.

And he was kind of hungry for once so he went walking aimlessly around the house demolishing an apple and two pieces of toast.

But then he just felt sick when his brain caught up with him.

He should change.

Shower, maybe. He usually took way better care of himself than this.

The floor in the kitchen was cold. Steve looked at the ceiling.

What the fuck was he even *doing*?

Like flicking a lighter, suddenly Steve felt anger lighting up in his stomach. Still staring at the ceiling he had to grimace just to hold it back. He could do something. Anything. He could throw his apple core across the room- better yet break his mother's favorite wine glass, still drying in the rack. He could crash his car- but that might kill him.

He could burn the whole house down.

But quickly as it came, the anger was gone. And he was just a dumb teenager standing in his kitchen in pajamas that left his skin sour.

He needed to get out. Go somewhere.

Which is how he ended up here, at the graveyard, standing by his car door with roses in his hand. Hoping to God he'd find it in himself to put one foot in front of the other in the dewy morning, and walk to as close as he'd ever get to Billy ever again.

Just stand there maybe. Or maybe he should say something- hey, look at that. He could walk.

And maybe the universe would give him a break, and he'd actually feel a tiny bit better if he ran his hand over the gravestone and murmured one more 'I love you' and left his silly roses that would only ever piss Billy off-

Steve tripped.

He caught his balance a millisecond before falling flat on his face-plus, crashing into some rando's grave seemed kind of, rude, you know. But Steve turned around and there was like, a full on shovel left on the ground. Just. There.

Weird.

Steve turned around. Billy's grave was supposed to be right near here, but-

"Jesus Christ." Steve said out loud.

He'd found Billy's gravestone- *William Hargrove. Beloved son and brother (bull-fucking-shit) . 1967-1985.*

But the dirt in front of it had been *completely* dug up.

Just a pit in the ground, with no coffin in sight.

2. grave-robbing (which isn't technically a felony)

Summary for the Chapter:

Billy knew his mom was a witch. He figured it out fairly young, too, but for a long time just attributed the various dried plants he'd find in his pillow case or vials of salt to superstition- they were Catholic before his dad remarried.

But he knew she had a small wooden chest that smelled like incense that he was not allowed to open or look at unless she was there. And only if his dad wasn't.

Sometimes he'd find a crystal in his backpack at school, would promptly hide it so no one would make fun- his mom was a hippie after all.

Sometimes she'd put funky smelling salves on his cuts and bruises. Sometimes on her own.

And some of the times were weirder than others. But mostly he was a kid, so he didn't notice or care. Didn't believe in that shit anyway.

Notes for the Chapter:

TRIGGER WARNING: this chapter has some uncomfy situations with billys mom! the word of the day is enmeshment. please proceed with caution if emotionally shitty parenting is tough for u to read!!!!

love u guys!

Billy knew his mom was a witch. He figured it out fairly young, too, but for a long time just attributed the various dried plants he'd find in his pillow case or vials of salt to superstition- they were Catholic before his dad remarried.

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Sometimes she'd put funky smelling salves on his cuts and bruises. Sometimes on her own.

And some of the times were weirder than others. But mostly he was a kid, so he didn't notice or care. Didn't believe in that shit anyway.

He only really remembered when his dad found her box of witchy stuff.

Suffice to say, it was thrown out.

She left soonish after that. Billy sometimes wondered if the two events were connected.

And Billy was just a dumb kid when she left, couldn't connect dots he'd become all too familiar with later. But he remembered one weird, witchy thing.

A few days before she left.

Billy was in his room. It was nighttime. And he was supposed to be asleep but he'd stayed up reading, absentmindedly wiggling a loose tooth with his tongue- his ninth one. He was hoping it would fall out tonight. He clicked his flashlight off quick when he heard footsteps, but soon realized he didn't need to.

His mom knocked on his door, and he knew it was her because she always knocked softly, three times.

She opened the door without waiting for an answer, stuck her head in.

"Hey, baby." She whispered, smiled at him. The light from the hall warmed up the colors of Billy's room.

"I think my tooth is gonna fall out tonight," he whispered back as she walked in, gently shutting the door behind her, but flicking his light on so they weren't in the dark.

"On its own? Or because you've been messing with it?" She sat on the edge of his bed, brushing a piece of his hair behind his ear.

"On its own." He lied.

She made a face at him. "Okay, mister. Open up, let's see."

He pulled back his cheek to show her.

"Very nice."

"Are you here to tell me to go to sleep?" He let his cheek go, swiped his tongue over the wiggly tooth.

"No- well, you should. But actually," She looked away from him then, into the middle distance, out his bedroom window. "I need to ask you a favor, baby. Can you do a favor for mommy?"

Billy was already at an age that he felt too old to refer to her as 'mommy,' much as he wanted to. "Yeah."

"You know when you go to the doctor and they have to prick your finger?"

Billy frowned. He hated doctors. "Yeah."

"I need to do that now. Is that okay?"

Billy was still frowning, but he trusted her then. Trusted her more than anyone. "Okay."

"Gimme your hand, baby." She put out her own for him to hold.

Billy remembered watching her pull out two things- a rose thorn and a gold chain. And before he could pull his hand away she had pressed the rose thorn into his finger, pulled it back quick and was kissing his finger better before he could even say 'ow.'

Then she said she loved him. More than anyone. She loved him, and did he love her?

Billy had sort of a weird feeling in his stomach when he said he loved her back. Like he was being lied to.

The next day, his mom gave him a pendant on a gold chain and told him never to take it off.

Weird. Witchy. Catholic. Billy trusted her.

She told him she loved him again. More than anyone.

She kissed his forehead. She looked sad.

Billy never took the necklace off.

He sort of objected to magic being done on minors. And he always sort of knew that's what it was, and that maybe it wasn't totally... kosher. But he never took it off.

He still had it on now. If any light could have gotten in through the black and satin lining of the coffin, it would have glinted, still gold.

Because he wasn't *not* dead.

Like being stuck in a dream you couldn't wake up from, unable to shake the sleep from your body, filling up your head like cotton.

If he tried to grasp what it *was* exactly that was happening to him it would simply sift through his fingers like so much sand on a lonely beach.

He could feel her. His mom. He could, sense her presence, he guessed.

It should have been comforting; to know she was there. Maybe that she was trying to save him. Wake him up.

But it wasn't. Instead there was this nagging feeling, like her gentle touch had turned to brittle fingernails trying to pry his brain open. Get him out by force.

And every sweet memory he had of her had long since turned sour.

--

Max believed in expressing her emotions to their fullest extent. Not necessarily in front of others, because other people generally sucked. But on her own, she kept no secrets from herself. She didn't know if this was a good or bad move considering after the fourth, she would cry for hours pretty much every day. Lay on her bed and cry. Lay on Billy's bed and cry. Cry in the shower.

It kept giving her headaches.

She wasn't gonna keep any of it down, but still. She was... in the thick of it.

And then came the question: was she *ever* going to feel better? Because honestly? Maybe not.

Maybe she was just going to sit on the shower floor and let snot and water drip off her chin until she was old enough to move out and never speak to her mom or Billy's dad ever again.

But then, she'd have to get there first.

She hated the funeral. She wished she could have bailed early like she saw Steve do. She sort of wished she could just stay with Steve. He was basically a grown up.

But he didn't look in any shape to even take care of himself.

Max got asked if she wanted to share a memory of 'the departed' by her mom.

It was actually the first time her mom so much as mentioned that Billy had died.

It was two days before the funeral, Max's mom knocked all timid at her door and stood in the doorway with the most understanding smile she could probably manage and asked.

Max didn't really remember much of what she herself said, mostly

just that she ended up screaming at her mom and slamming the door in her face.

Her brain kicked back in at the sound of the door.

She blinked tears out of her eyes. First headache of the day and it wasn't even 10am. Max let her head fall forward against the back of the door. She could hear her mother's footsteps retreating down the hall.

She hadn't meant to be mean.

She was just. Angry.

She should apologize, she felt *bad*. But.

"You act like this isn't your fault- it is!-

"Max, honey-"

"You could have done something! You should have! You're an adult!-"

"I know this is hard for you-"

"You should have tried to protect him- us. You're a bad mom-"

"You don't mean that-"

"Yes I fucking do."

More tears slid down Max's cheeks as she screwed her eyes shut.

She missed Billy more than she would ever have told him when he was alive.

Because he was such a piece of shit, she resented him so much for making it so they had to move, and turning mean on a dime-

But she didn't hate him.

Because he had been nice to her. Before. And he was being nice again.

A month ago he'd driven her to Indianapolis to get a new board- even helped pay for it.

Probably because he felt bad for what happened to the last one.

"I'm not giving you more than like, fifty bucks. At *maximum* ." He had said, when they got to the skateshop.

"I didn't ask you to! You offered." She snipped at him a little, but she was still smiling. Had been since he announced their plan for the day after their parents left for work.

"Yeah and since I offered I'm making sure you know the terms and conditions." He was checking his reflection in the store window as they walked up. "And make sure whatever douchebag is working the reg doesn't overcharge you for any new junk."

"They *won't* . I know my shit."

There was a douchebag working the reg, but he didn't even think about trying to overcharge, because just as Max was getting what a deck *was* explained to her by a guy with half her experience, Billy walked up behind her with a toothpick that seemed to have *magically* appeared between his teeth and asked her if the guy wasn't giving her a hard time.

And he bought her a sticker- Marvin the Martian.

And he waited around for her to try it out in the parking lot before they left.

Max hadn't been able to skate much lately. Reminded her of him too much.

A memory of the departed.

--

Max was asleep when she woke up to someone banging on her door- it was a summer-Monday.

Thank Christ she was home alone because she was the one to answer

when she pulled the door open and Steve practically fell through the doorway-

“Parents home?” was the first thing he asked her.

“No, why?” Max stared at him, he looked, like, deranged. “Steve, you look-”

“You have to come with me. Right now.” Steve hopped down one of the stairs, pointing to his car. “Like, right the fuck now.”

Max was already grabbing her hoodie and practically running after him. “What happened?”

“It’s Billy’s grave-”

“What?”

“Someone dug it up.”

--

Steve looked like shit. That was the first thing Max noticed. Other than the cut that would probably heal into a scar on his lower lip and chin, and some just, general bashed-up-ed-ness, He’d really cleaned up for the funeral. He must have just been lying face down on the floor or something before that. Dark circles under his eyes- and she’d seen him wear that shirt earlier in the week. So however bad Max was doing, Steve was probably worse. He was ranting a little, only slightly crazed with the combined hand movements, but the long and the short of it was he’d gone to graveyard and when he’d got there there was a hole in the ground where Billy’s body should be and why would anyone want Billy’s body like maybe the government was doing weird body swap shit again but why would they want the body now? And why didn’t they just switch it out before?

Steve kept up his neverending speculations, had to clear his throat a couple times like he was trying to stop his voice from cracking, and he parked kind of far off from the actual graveyard gates so they had to run up one of those fucking spooky ass grassy knolls.

It was already too hot for how early in the day it was. Max regretted grabbing her hoodie, and regretted the running, but Steve was running so she had to catch up-

“Fuck.”

“What? What happened?” Max was trying not to sound like she was out of breath when she caught up with Steve at the gravestone.

“It was just here-” Steve was saying.

There was. No pit. Only a patch of grassless dirt. Which, you know, tracked with a coffin having just been buried there, but-

“Max, listen,” Steve was already sounding desperate. “I know this is making me look, *crazy*, but I swear-”

She waved him off, leaning closer to the dirt patch. “No, I believe you.”

“You- really?”

Max rolled her eyes. “Duh, but also,” She pointed at the ground. “Look.”

Deep scoring marks traced from the edge of the seemingly inconspicuous dirt, through the grass of the rest of the cemetery.

Steve and Max exchanged a look before both taking off following the tracks. Sunlight beat down, made Max squint when light glinted off the newer, shiner gravestones, but they made it halfway across the whole cemetery following the tracks until they dropped off at the parking lot- empty.

Bits and pieces of *something* but no real evidence of anything was starting to get on Max’s necrosis as, for the first time since Steve picked her up, she registered the gravity of what was happening. This wasn’t just one thing to the next- there was a chance- no-

“Why didn’t you fucking follow these before?” Max gestured to the tracks behind her in the grass before they disappeared at the concrete.

Steve turned to look at her. “They weren’t here before! And I had to get you.”

“You should have stayed! Tried to see who it was!”

“Oh, and scare them off? We actually have like, a lead-”

“Do you even remember who was parked here?”

“I didn’t park in the parking lot!-”

“Why not?!”

“Cause I can’t let anyone see me, Max.” Steve, at last, failed to stop his voice from cracking. He recovered from it quickly, didn’t look at Max directly, but still.

Max pushed her hair back with both hands. Sighed.

“What would anyone even want with his body anyway?” Steve mumbled.

Max didn’t respond, just frowned at the already baking tarmac. “We should get the others.”

Getting the others might have been more of a rallying cry before, but on this way-too-sunny Monday morning, all it managed to summon was Dustin and Lucas. Will and El weren’t allowed to leave the Byers’ really, especially with El still on crutches, and The Wheelers as a whole were on a ‘much needed vacation’ in Maine, to quote Nancy, who had been quoting her mom.

Max felt almost reassured, pulling out her walkie talkie to reach out, getting the affirmative. Felt like, you know, before. When they felt like they were *doing* something.

They only had to wait twenty or so minutes.

“Wait, so, Steve,” Dustin turned to squint a little, bike wheel still spinning slightly where he’d ditched it on the ground behind their little gathering. “You noticed this?” He pointed to the tracks.

Steve’s posture tightened a little, he opened his mouth, but Max cut him off. “I did. Steve was just here. He drove.”

“Keep up, man,” Lucas nudged Dustin’s shoulder before shooting Max

a smile, like ‘notice how I’ve been paying attention?’ Max rolled her eyes again.

They ran through Steve’s earlier theories. Immediately ruling out the lab, or the government for the sloppiness, but still unable to determine what would have been strong enough to lug a whole ass coffin up from six feet under and- wait-

“Hey, uh.” Steve crouched as kids continued their meeting of the minds. “Is. Is grass growing on this?”

“It’s dirt, Steve.” Dustin said, only a little condescending. “It grows stuff”

“Yeah I know dipshit,” Steve ran his hand over the little green shoots. “But it was dug up like two hours ago. Nothing would grow back this fast.”

That was enough to pique Dustin's attention, and pretty soon he was crouched by Steve's side running his hand over the little patch.

“Huh.”

“Yeah.” Steve ran a hand through his hair. When would things stop being weird?

“What would make it do that?” Max joined in the examination.

“Weird chemicals probably?” Lucas offered. “But if we’re going off the no-government theory-”

“WOAH!” Dustin yelled from behind the gravestone, effectively startling everyone.

“Jesus, man-” Steve started.

“Shsh,” Dustin waved his hand. “Lucas, come look at this.”

“Is anyone gonna enlighten *us*?” Max asked pointedly when Lucas and Dustin started exchanging looks and half sentences.

“It’s. It’s runes.” Lucas said.

“Helpful.”

“No like,” Lucas tugged her arm to get her to look. “Magical symbols.

Spellcasting stuff.”

“Not more nerd shit,” Steve mumbled, climbing to his feet and dusting himself off.

“What do they mean?” Max ran her hand over the marks crudely scratched into the stone.

“Dunno. We’d have to look it up.”

“How?”

“Well in the Dungeon Master’s Guide-”

“Okay,” Steve raised his voice. “Can we get back on track please?”

“This is on track, this is a clue!”

“We need more clues than your weird magic numbers-”

Dustin and Steve bickered about DnD for about ten more seconds before Max cut them off to get everyone to agree- if they wanted more clues, they’d probably have to dig up the grave.

--

The party returned to the graveyard with shovels around sunset. Max had advocated for a midnight curfew but 8pm was as close as Mrs. Sinclair was willing to cut it, and was already suspicious of why they’d ‘be at the arcade’ so late, but Lucas had assured her it was a special Monday thing.

“Very slick.” Max said to him when he told her, helping to grab a shovel out of the back of Steve’s car.

He touched a hand to his heart, all theatrical. “Do my ears deceive me? Or was that a compliment.”

She smiled a little, couldn’t help it. Then frowned.

Lucas walked next to her up the little hill.

Max wanted to help dig more than she did, only because Steve

insisted on doing most of it. She called him a sexist. He looked very personally hurt and said if anything he was being ageist and also he wasn't letting Dustin dig either.

Dustin was perfectly happy to sit and draw the weird runes on the back of the gravestone, never so much as touching a shovel.

Lucus helped Steve dig probably an unnecessary amount. Max got the feeling he was trying to like, prove to her that he cared. But she knew he cared.

Especially after they unearthed the thing- there wasn't a lot of suspense to it.

It was just a very cheaply constructed plywood coffin. Nothing like the one that had been lowered into the ground. There was a little breath holding when Steve pried it open. It was empty. Even after Dustin sniffed around it for 'additional clues' and found nothing, Steve told him to get out of the thing- "Pretty sure it's bad luck to sit in a coffin."

Steve and Dustin bickered on the sidelines, had already started reburying the thing, when Max felt Lucas's hand nudge against hers.

"Hey," He tugged at the end of her sweatshirt sleeve. "Are you... okay?"

"Obviously not." She snipped a little. Then, "Sorry."

He shrugged. "It's okay."

Max wondered if she should voice any of her concerns about where Billy's body might be, how could they be *sure* it wasn't some freaky lab again, or the feds even, and the lurking, horrifyingly hopeful possibility of, you know what if. What if Billy wasn't-

"Can," Max started. "Can you just. Hug me?"

Lucas could do that. Max screwed her eyes shut, leaned her head against his shoulder, let him hug her.

"You smell like gravedirt." She said into his t-shirt.

“I mean, yeah.”

Steve and Dustin were still arguing- about literally nothing.

“You didn't have to come.” Max said finally. “He wasn't nice to you.”

Lucas laughed a little. “No shit. But you know. He apologised. And, did that whole thing on the fourth-”

“What, *died* ?”

But even as Max said it. There was the dangerous shard of hope.

Because I mean, was it impossible to think that maybe he hadn't?

--

Steve drove everyone home.

He dropped Max off last. She was relaying what Dustin and Lucas had been explaining to her while Steve was busy shittily reburying the coffin. He didn't have the energy to interrupt her. She sounded kinda like he had earlier in the day, manic but. Hopeful, almost. And this might have been that- something to be hopeful about. But Steve couldn't help feeling like whatever happened, at the end of it, Billy would still be- still-

“Max.” Steve cut her off. “I know this is. Exciting. But we shouldn't. Shouldn't get too crazy, you know?”

Max frowned. They had just pulled up outside her house. “No. I don't know.”

“C'mon man,” Steve sighed, leaned back in his seat. “You know what I mean, it's the whole, denial thing-”

“Oh my god! Seriously?” Max rounded on him. “We have an actual like, lead and you're still-”

“He's dead, Max.” Steve said flatly. “We shouldn't pretend like he's not.”

Max's frown deepened. Her cheeks got red and for a second, Steve thought he could see tears brimming. But her voice was steady. "Fuck you, Steve. We're both sad."

She slammed his car door as hard as she could manage on the way out.

He might have called after her to try to apologise. Couldn't though.

--

It should have worked.

Frustration, desperation, *rage* coursed through her veins.

Why hadn't it worked?

She'd done the spell so carefully- it had held, she knew it had. She would have sensed if it hadn't. This wasn't her first goddamn rodeo but Billy was still lifeless at her feet- well, *almost* lifeless. She could feel him in there, just below the surface, strands of magic- her magic- keeping him together in stasis- this was a mother's love.

Didn't he know that? Couldn't he tell this was all for him? She had only done what was best for him, she had been trying to protect them *both*, she only left because she *had to*. She *loved him*. She *came back*.

Try as she might, he stayed still and cold. It seemed almost intentional. Didn't the ungrateful bastard know he was breaking her heart?

Who could have replaced her?